**3.2 Necessities and luxuries**

As the division of opinion between the government and low income people illustrates, definitions of poverty are the stuff of political debate. People in the Rowntree studies tended to focus on ‘paying bills and food’. Most people's list of basic needs would also include adequate food and clean water, clothing, shelter and heating. But are there also less apparently physiological, more evidently social, necessities of life?

**Activity 2**

Look back at the quotation in [section 3.1](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=399036&section=1.3.1). A woman on a low income seems to be arguing that a TV is a ‘necessity’ for her son.

* What do you think of her argument? Do you think a TV is a ‘luxury’ or a ‘necessity’ in the contemporary UK?
* Decide what you think and why before reading the discussion.

[Reveal discussionHide discussion](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=399036&section=1.3.2)

**Discussion**

**Comment**

Televisions were not a necessity in the 1930s since they were not available. But how about in the UK today? You may have answered, no, a TV cannot be a ‘necessity’ because one can stay alive without a TV. But what about living a human life, with enough sociability and communication to make life worthwhile? Many accounts of the experience of poverty include the pain of social isolation: of not being able to afford to socialise with your peers. Communication with others is part of being human, and in a society where virtually everyone has access to a TV at home, people without television are deprived of access to one of the staples of conversation, jokes and information exchange. Children can suffer particularly from limited access to a shared culture – something the mother quoted in [section 3.1](http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=399036&section=1.3.1) was trying to avoid for her son.

So one might conclude that in the UK, where 96 per cent of households had a television in 1994, it is now a ‘necessity’. A lack of a TV constitutes relative deprivation if all the other children in the class have access to one *and* it has become a basic means of communication and cultural reference point. By the same token we could argue that a radio was a necessity in Britain in the 1940s. A TV seems to be a necessity at the end of the twentieth century; a computer may become a necessity in future years if using one becomes a common way to bank, shop and communicate.

There is no ‘right answer’ to Activity 2. Necessities are a matter of social and political judgement. But that does not mean our definitions are arbitrary. In 1990 a study called *Breadline Britain* asked 1800 people whether a number of items were ‘necessities’; 58 per cent put a TV in that category, up from 51 per cent in a similar survey in 1983 (Goodman et al., 1997, p. 244). Our ideas about what we need depend on what others have and what others expect. Even notions of what constitutes adequate food and heating have changed over time. Social scientists therefore generally recognise that there is a strong ‘relative’ element in definitions of **poverty**. That is, there are some irreducible human needs, but poverty in a society is also defined relative to the goods, services and opportunities *available* to the non-poor.

**Definition**

**Poverty**

Poverty is more than a lack of money. It carries a stigma because it is defined relative to what people think is needed for a decent life.